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The Palimpsest

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH
Superintendent

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSESTS

In early times palimpsests were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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Old Songs For New

Not the least of the sins of radio and phonograph is the fact that they have turned us from a race of singers into a race of listeners. Whereas Lily, the hired girl, used to sing at the top of her rich alto voice as she rolled out pie crust or dusted the furniture

> If the lady of the house
> Got a mouse
> In her blouse
> Would she holler?
> Well, I guess she would!

now her descendants turn on the radio and listen to the latest dance tunes coming in from Des Moines or Chicago or New York. Whereas, as a youngster when I grew tired at evening, I climbed on grandfather's knees and was sung to sleep with

> I'm tired now and sleepy too,
> So put me in my little bed.

Come, Birdie, come
Kiss me good-night
For I my evening prayers have said;
I'm tired now and sleepy, too
So put me in my little bed.

now my youngsters are prepared for sleep by listening to the hair-raising feats of Buck Rogers or some other energetic young man experiencing wildly exciting and highly improbable adventures. I wonder how many grandmothers now sing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" or some other highly sentimental "Sunday song" as they fill the cookie jar. (Perhaps the answer to that is that grandmothers no longer have cookie jars.)

Let us go back to any small Iowa community fifty or seventy-five years ago. It is about this season of the year, time for snow to cover the ground. Into town comes a school-teacherish figure who makes the rounds of the important families. It is the singing "professor", come to start his winter class in music. Every Thursday evening as soon as the chores are done and supper is over most of the members of the community will troop to the schoolhouse for their lesson. They have paid "tuition" of fifty cents or perhaps a dollar (the rate varied from season to season and from place to place) for the privilege of coming together to sing all the old songs that have come to

be part of the very life blood of the community, and perhaps to learn a few new ones that the teacher has picked up in his wanderings. The teacher mounts the platform, writes on the blackboard the first stanza of a song, draws from his pocket his pitch pipe or tuning fork and either hums or sings through the tune while his pupils listen. Then sounding the key again he asks them all to try it. Over and over the stanza is sung until it is well fixed in their minds, whereupon a new one is put on the board. The exceptional teacher had a musical library which he carried with him from township to township, but most carried words and tunes in their heads, legitimate descendants of the old minstrels.

Most localities had their own composers, too, individuals who could not only add an endless stream of verses to "Skip to me, Lou" but could celebrate special occasions by composing songs, usually set to popular tunes. And so a rich and varied body of songs grew up, kept current by daily use. This article can do no more than suggest the popular subjects.

It is perhaps not strange that many of the songs that were sung had love as their theme, and that many of these love songs should have sounded a melancholy note. The way of true love never did run smooth, and either parental

opposition, mutual misunderstanding, or what is known in the divorce courts as mutual incompatibility all played their part, along with accident, to make lovers sorrow and pine away. A perennial favorite was "Fair Charlotte". The present version was collected by Miss Clara Swan in Morning Sun, Iowa, but the song's popularity is attested by its appearance all over the State.

Fair Charlotte lived by the mountainside
A lone and dreary spot
No dwelling there for five miles 'round
Except her father's cot.

Her father loved to see her dressed
And trimmed like a city belle
For she was the only child he had,
And he loved his daughter well.

On many a cold and wintry night,
Young swains would gather there;
Her father kept a social cot
And she was very fair.

It was New Year's Eve, the sun was low,
When beamed her wandering eye;
And oft to the frosty window she'd go
To watch the sleighs go by.

Now restless beamed the wandering eye,
As a well known voice she hears,
And dashing up to the cottage door
Young Charles and his sleigh appear.

"Fifteen miles away," he said,
"There's a merry dance to-night".
Although the air was dreadful cold,
Her heart was warm and light.

"Oh daughter dear," the mother cried,
"These blankets 'round you fold
For 'tis a dreadful night without
You'll catch your death of cold."

"Oh no, oh no," the daughter cried,
And laughed like a gypsy queen,
"To be bundled up for riding out
I never will be seen."

Her bonnet and her shawl was on,
She stepped into the sleigh,
While o'er the field and the mountainside,
Together they rolled away.

Says Charles, "Such a night I never saw,
I scarce the reins can hold."
Young Charlotte answered dim these words,
"I am exceeding cold."

He cracked his whip and urged his steed
More speedy than before
Till five weary miles at length
In silence they passed o'er.

Says Charles, "How fast the freezing ice
Is gathering on my brow."
Fair Charlotte answered dim these words,
"I'm growing warmer now."

He cracked his whip and he urged his steed,
Through the frost and the cold starlight,
Till at length the ballroom did appear,
And the village was in sight.

Young Charles drove up and he jumped out,
And gave his hand to her,
"Why sit you there like a monument,
Have you no power to stir?"

Into the lighted hall,
Her lifeless form was borne;
Fair Charlotte was a frozen corpse,
And never could look on.

Such is the penalty of pride! Far more sentimental, with the suggestion of frustrated love, is "The Dying Nun", rich in the flavor of the old melodrama.

Let the air blow in upon me,
Let me see the midnight sky;
Stand back, Sisters, from around me:
God, it is so hard to die!
Raise my pillows up, O Martha;
Sister Martha, you were kind;
Come and stand alone beside me,
Ere I leave you all behind.

Hold my hands, so cold and frozen;
Once they were so soft and white;
And this ring that falls down from it,
Clasped my finger round so tight.
Little ring they thought so worthless
That they let me keep it there;
Only a plain golden circlet,
With a lock of Douglas's hair.

O, my father, O, my mother!
Can you not forgive the past,
When you hear a stranger tell you
How your stray lamb died at last?
And of all that once did love me,
Who will weep, when I am dead?
Only you, O Sister Martha!
Keep the last watch by my bed.

Sister Martha, Sister Martha!
You were kinder than the rest;

Raise my head and let me lean it,
While I live, upon your breast.
I was thinking of some music
That I heard long, long ago;
O how sweet the nuns are singing,
In the chapel, soft and low.

But a strain of heavenly music
Breaks the solemn midnight dream,
And I hear the wild waltz pealing,
And I seem to float with him.
Douglas! Douglas! I am coming!
Where you are, I too, am there;
Freed at last, I come, my dearest;
Death gives back your little Clare.

Sister Martha, you are near me?
Has the moon gone down so soon?
Oh, this cell is cold as winter,
Though I know that it is June.
Sister, in your white bed lying,
Sleeping in the June moonlight,
Through your dreams comes there no vision?
Clare dies alone tonight!

Oceans of tears, too, were shed vicariously over the father and child in "The Baggage Car Ahead", over "Take This Letter to My Mother",

and over such bits of gruesome reporting as "The Brooklyn Theater".

There were also those songs which dealt with current problems, most interesting of which for a long period of years was the fight for prohibition. "Away the Bowl", sounds as if it may have been a "converted" drinking song.

We'll drink no more nor buy nor sell,
Away, away the bowl
The tippler's offer we repel
Away, away the bowl.

More typical perhaps was the lugubrious account of "Bessie, the Drunkard's Daughter", who might have stepped right out of *Ten Nights in a Barroom*. The following version was secured by Miss Lillian Bonar of Knoxville, "collector extraordinary".

Out in the darkness I've wandered alone
I have no friends, no dear tender home.
Nobody cares for me; nobody would cry,
Even if poor little Bessie should die.

Chorus:
Mother, Oh why did you leave me alone?
I have no friends, no dear tender home.
Dark is the night and the wind rages wild.
God pity Bessie, the drunkard's child.

Barefooted, tired, I've wandered all day
Looking for work — I am too small they say.
All the day long I've been begging for bread,
Father's a drunkard and mother is dead.

We were so happy till father drank rum.
Then all our troubles and trials begun,
Mother so lonely she cried all the day,
Baby and I were too hungry to play

Men of temperance please won't you try
For poor little Bessie will soon starve and die
To save my poor father from his sad, sad fate,
For something tells me 'twill soon be too late.

Lest it should seem that tears and tears alone were the subject of these songs, it is well to remember that there were plenty of jovial ones, from "Mr. and Mrs. Grumble" (the story of a farmer who tried to do his wife's work for a day while she did his) and "Tim Finnegan's Wake" to the traditional "Paper of Pins", whose ancestry goes back across the ocean to Britain where it appears as a part of the ballad of "Redesdale and Wise William".

Madam, I'll give you a paper of pins,
If that's the way your love begins,

Madam, will you walk, Madam, will you talk,
Madam, will you walk and talk with me?

Sir, I'll not accept your paper of pins
And that's not the way our love begins.
No, I will not walk, no, I will not talk,
Sir, I will not walk and talk with you.

Madam, I'll give (to) you a new silk gown
And every thread shall cost a crown.
Madam, will you walk, Madam, will you talk,
Madam, will you walk and talk with me?

Sir, I'll not accept your new silk gown,
If every thread should cost a crown.
No, I will not walk, no, I will not talk,
Sir, I will not walk and talk with you.

Madam, I'll give (to) you a coach and six
And every horse as black as pitch.
Madam, will you walk, Madam, will you talk,
Madam will you walk and talk with me?

Sir, I won't accept your coach and six
And every horse as black as pitch.
No, I will not walk, no, I will not talk,
Sir, I will not walk and talk with you.

Madam, I'll give to you the keys of my heart
To lock all other loves out.

Madam, will you walk, Madam, will you talk,
Madam, will you walk and talk with me?

Sir, I'll not accept the keys of your heart
To lock all other loves out.
No, I will not walk, no, I will not talk,
Sir, I will not walk and talk with you.

Madam, I'll give you the keys of my desk
And you'll have money at your request.
Madam, will you walk, madam, will you talk,
Madam, will you walk and talk with me?

Sir, I'll accept the keys of your desk
And I'll have money at my request.
Sir, I will walk, Sir, I will talk,
Sir, I will walk and talk with you.

Madam, I care no more for you
Than I do for an old shoe.
Madam, I'll not walk, and I'll not talk,
Madam, I'll not walk and talk with you.

But perhaps most interesting of all are those songs which are more truly indigenous to Iowa, the product of the local muse, songs asserting the glory of the community in which they are written or singing the praises of individuals there. Sometimes they too were the result of the singing school, at other times the product of play-parties

or of chance associations. The most elaborate of these is "Glorious Honey Creek", collected by Miss Clara Swan in 1929 at Morning Sun. It was written, she says, by J. K. Milbourne, teacher of the Honey Creek school in 1878.

Kind friends we're going to sing you a song
About our country round,
It can't be beat in any state,
So great is its renown.
The houses are remarkable,
And made of the very best stuff,
Though some resemble palaces,
And some are very rough.

Chorus:
Glorious Honey Creek listen here,
I'll tell you what is so.
It's bound to be the greatest place,
This side of Ohio.

The citizens are numerous,
And what's the best of all,
Some wear fine clothes and high-heeled boots
And some a waterfall.
The old folks are so good and kind,
They realize the truth,
That generations yet unborn,
May hear of Honey Creek youth.

[Three lines here were lost]
When two can go together.
Now Billy Brown has left the Creek
To go to the distant West,
The thought of leaving his girl alone,
Does chill his gentle breast.

The farmers are the business kind,
Their work will stand the test,
But of all the hogs that's raised around,
Ren Wilson's are the best.
There is a chap around this place,
We will not speak his name,
But when you see him ride a mouse,
You'll know it is the same.

Chorus:
Glorious Honey Creek listen here,
I'll tell you what is so,
Cy Hewitt has the longest legs,
This side of Ohio.

Frank Gregory we must not slight,
Nor set his face abash,
For underneath his handsome nose
He sports a gay mustache.
Before Miss Rena he would bow,
With wondrous grace you know,
And see her safely to her home,
When Lou don't want to go.

But time would fail to tell you all,
You'll find its history told,
By reading Ben McClurkin's works,
Wrote in the days of old.
And now kind friends we're through with our song
We hope no harm's been done,
Twas only to pass the time along,
And have a little fun.

Chorus:
Glorious Honey Creek, yes, you're right,
'Tis the pride of the world, you know.
It's the nearest place to no place at all,
This side of Ohio.

Or there were briefer songs, like the song of the States and capitals, which pupils used as mnemonic devices. The following text of the song of the Iowa counties was contributed to the *Annals of Iowa* by Almeda B. Harpel.

Our home is in Iowa, westward toward the setting sun,
Just between two mighty rivers where the flowing waters run.
We have towns and we have cities; we have many noble streams;
We have ninety-nine counties and now we'll say their names.

Lyon, Osceola, Dickinson, where the Spirit Lake
we see,
Emmet, Kossuth, Winnebago, Worth near Lake
Albert Lea.
Mitchell, Howard, Winneshiek and Allamakee
we find
Make eleven northern counties on the Minnesota
line.
Clayton, Dubuque, Jackson, Clinton, together
with Scott and Muscatine,
Lee, Louisa and Des Moines upon the eastern line
are seen.
Van Buren, Davis, Appanoose, Decatur, Ring-
gold, Wayne we spy,
Taylor, Page and Fremont upon Missouri's
border lie.
Pottawattamie, Harrison, Mills, Monona, Wood-
bury, Plymouth, Sioux
Are all the counties around the borders of the
state we view.
Next we point to O'Brien, Palo Alto, Clay, Han-
cock, Cerro Gordo, Floyd now see,
Chickasaw I say, Fayette, Bremer, Butler, Frank-
lin, next upon the map we see.
Wright and Humboldt, Pocahontas, Buena Vista,
Cherokee,
Ida, Sac, Calhoun and Webster, Hamilton with
name so rare.

Next is Hardin, Grundy, Black Hawk, Buchanan,
Delaware.
Jones, Linn, Benton, Tama, Marshall, Story,
Crawford, Carroll, Boone,
Let us not your patience weary, we will have them
all told soon.
Cedar, Greene, Johnson, Iowa, and Poweshiek by
the same,
Next is Jasper, Polk and Dallas, names of presi-
dential fame.
Guthrie, Audubon, and Shelby, Cass, Madison
and Adair,
Warren, Marion, Mahaska and Keokuk are there.
Henry, Jefferson, Wapello, Monroe, but Wash-
ington we missed.
Lucas, Union, Clarke and Adams, and Mont-
gomery fill the list.

Trivial and insipid as the words of these songs often seem, when sung to the very simple tunes to which most are set they take on life and color and even quiet dignity. They are no mere curiosities of antiquarian or collector, like some of the monstrosities that appear in antique shops; they are living and vital bits of culture, simple and unaffected examples of a folk art all too limited in its manifestations in this country.

J. W. ASHTON

Comment by the Editor

OF BALLADS

A ballad in print is a kind of perversion. Like a clown at a wedding, the natural exuberance of expression is quite overwhelmed by the dignity of the formal array of verses and stanzas. The inflexible precision of recorded sentiment seems wholly incongruous with the spontaneity which probably characterized the original composition. Ballads are inherently vital, not petrified; transient, not permanent.

The folks who create these poetic descriptions are completely indifferent to the fate of their rhymes. What one suggests, another improves. If a new stanza is needed or the deeds of a neighborhood hero deserve celebration, the ballad is changed to suit the occasion. Some become fixed by long usage, but others vary according to local tradition. All are essentially impromptu and oral. They frequently grow in fantastic patterns, like frost on a window pane. To print them is to etch the erstwhile design in the glass with strong acid.

If the publication of ballads is a form of literary archaeology, some historical value may accrue from the anachronistic display of homely artifacts

of previous culture. The native songs of a people constitute a mirror of other times. But scholarly research and catalogues of variants can scarcely revive the spirit of old-fashioned musical relaxation.

All ballads ought to be sung. To read one is almost impertinent. Let everybody join in the lilting or melancholy tune, whole-heartedly and unabashed, jubilantly or sad according to the mood, but without concern for rhetoric or sense. Let rhythm and sentiment be unrestrained. That is the style of the ballad.

Perhaps the acceptance of the radio counterfeit is a test of our civilization. We watch the game instead of playing it; we listen to professional nonsense instead of creating our own. Indeed, it seems that we even submit to being sung at instead of to.

J. E. B.

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[Note — The names of contributors of articles in THE PALIMPSEST are printed in SMALL CAPITALS. The titles of articles and of all other publications are printed in *italics*.]

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